Chapter 15

ILLNESS CALLS A HALT

WHEN after three days we had got the house habitable, cupboards and bookshelves ordered, lamps burning, water and food routine running smoothly, and the first friendly contacts with our neighbours established, we asked leave to pay our first call on the Mir, the king of the country and our host.

Two horses were found for us—it was a welcome let-off that the nature of the country made it useless to keep our own horses—and we started early, while it was still cool, on the four-mile ride to Báltít, his capital. The Great North Road from Kashmir to Central Asia is here some four to five feet wide; the only rideable road in the country. For the first couple of miles it runs fairly level between high field walls, just dipping 50 feet now and again to cross a stony gully, down which pour at times irresistible floods of mud and boulders; then it staggers almost perpendicularly up some hundreds of feet till it reaches the level of the Dála and runs along with the water channel (which is perhaps 4 feet wide and 2 feet deep) on its left and a steep drop on the right into the first fields below. High above us towered staircases of narrow fields and behind them great serrated snow peaks, the most interesting of which culminates in a 2,000-foot needle of sheer granite too steep ever to hold the snow.

This is Princess Búbuli's Peak, and the story goes that when the hero Kiser (the Gesar of Tibetan myth[1] and an

[1] For original Tibetan versions of his story, see Madame Alexandra David-Neel, *Gesar of Ling*; for the Burushaski version, see D. L. R. L., in *Folklore*, XLII, June 2, 1931.

incarnate deity) conquered Hai Hai Yúl (= Hunza) he took to wife the Princess Búbuli. He had not been long in the country till he saw in a dream Tibet invaded and his earlier queen carried into captivity, so he determined to return and deal with his enemies. Even in the Tibetan versions of the Gesar Saga it is difficult to avoid thinking him an ugly type of hero, a still more unpleasant manifestation of the divine, and the absolute limit in undesirable husbands. Princess Búbuli asked when she might look for his return: "I'll go to-morrow and return yesterday"; he said, "when donkeys grow horns, when millstones grow beards, when the river flows uphill, I shall come back." Lest she should get into trouble during this brief grass-widowhood he seated her on this granite spike with a 200-lb. bag of millet-seed and a cock: "Give him one grain a year, and when the grain is done, I shall return." And there the luckless princess sits, and you can hear her wailing in the winter storm.

The road commands a fine view of the junction of the Nagir with the Hunza River, and the rugged, savage valley which leads to the Nagir capital, tucked away out of sight amongst its sunless mountains near the great Hispar glacier. On our Hunza side the ground falls steeply with fertile bays of terraced fields and groves of apricots, all still in late July laden with their golden fruit. The road winds round various bluffs, following of course the contours of the mountain-side, and you can see several villages below, including Ganesh, clustered on the very edge of the river cliffs. High above the field-terraces on our left we presently espied the white front of the fortress-palace that has looked down over the fields of Hunza for at least six hundred years—surely the most dominating seat of kings in the wide world. It is built on the cliff edge of a projecting promontory that falls perpendicularly—but from the road invisibly—behind it; and behind that again lies the mighty ravine of the Ulter Ber, up which, far out of sight, is the almost inaccessible glacier that supplies all the waters of Hunza, from Áltít (two miles beyond and some hundreds of feet below Báltít) to Aliábád, feeding five or six different aqueducts, including, of course, the Dála.

[625] [622] personal influence, we found the lack of even minor misdemeanours among the Hunzukuts perennially astonishing.

796 ● 773 The Tumushelling Bonfire would seem to have originated amongst the Shins, but the Hunza Burusho, with their delight in pageantry, have lifted it and made it the central item in whatever were their own original Solstice rites. The oft-told story of the Bonfire is this: Once upon a time there lived a tyrant King of Gilgit, Shíri Badat by name, who exacted the tribute of one lamb or kid daily from his people. The custom was that each house in turn should pay the tribute. One day the turn fell to a poor old woman who possessed nothing in the world but one well-beloved pet lamb. Shíri Badat ate the lamb as usual, but remarked that it had a peculiarly delicate flavour, and asked its history. The old woman was summoned to the presence and cross-questioned. Yes, it was rather a special lamb. The ewe, its mother, had died when it was born, and the old woman had given it to her daughter-in-law to suckle; so the lamb had been reared on human milk.

This proved an unfortunate revelation, for from that day forward Shíri Badat demanded a human infant per day, and would not be gainsaid. The country groaned in misery, but the people were helpless, for Shíri Badat was no mortal man to be easily murdered; he was of Peri stock, and bore a charmed life.

Now it happened that a young prince from a neighbouring country had fled in disguise to Gilgit to escape intriguers seeking his life at home. He had taken sanctuary in the Wazir's house, and there he met Princess Nur Bakht, who was a foster-child of the Wazir's. The two young people fell in love, and when the Princess found she was with child she was filled with fear lest her baby should fall a victim to her father's unnatural appetite. So the Wazir, the Prince, and she hatched out a plot in which Nur Bakht was to play the rôle of Delilah to the cannibal Samson, Shíri Badat.

"Father," she said one day, "your subjects are full of wrath and hate because of the baby-tax you levy on them; I fear me they will find some means to slay you. Now if I knew the secret of your life I could the better protect you against harm."

WINTER AND THE "GREAT COLD"

The old simpleton thereupon revealed to her that while he was invulnerable to spear or arrow, axe or sword, his heart was made of butter and he could be destroyed by fire. 773 796

The conspirators thereupon, working privily by night, dug a trench close under the walls of the King's fort and filled it with dry wood, and on a given night at a given signal every Gilgit household poured forth its menfolk armed with blazing torches which they flung into the trench with a great cry: "The enemy is upon you!" The butter-hearted tyrant ran forth and perished miserably in the circle of fierce heat, and the Prince and Princess reigned in his stead.

While Gilgit itself has long since ceased to celebrate its deliverance, the Tumushelling Bonfire in Hunza keeps aflame the memory of Shíri Badat and his heart of butter. In olden days it seems that every Hunza household let its fire die out and rekindled the hearth by a brand from the Tumushelling Fire, but this practice had lapsed before any of our informants could remember.

One winter day, after a gruelling forenoon of solid hard note-taking, DL said: "I'm just about half dead. We must take a quiet walk this afternoon. We'll go up to the Mir's Stables; we can't meet anyone up there. I positively could not talk or listen any more." 423 311

The "Mir's Stables" bear no relation to a stable as we understand it. Above the line of terraced fields that sweep round the bay of Aliábád there are 200 or 300 feet of sloping mountain side, forming rude pasture grounds: the *toqs*. Above them rise the steep sand and rock slopes that flow down from the towering crags above. A little farther down the valley from us there is a kind of shelf above the *toqs*, a small roughly level plateau, scattered thick with huge boulders, which is called the "Mir's Stables." It isn't irrigated from any channel; it lies above the highest one, which in any case has petered completely out before it gets so far; but as it is fairly flat it catches any rain or snow there is, and it gets a certain amount of snow and rain drainage from the rocks above, and so in between the boulders and rocks there are patches of coarse, natural grass and thorn bushes. This bit of ground